

Matter of Fact By Joseph Alsop

'Repudiation'

VICE PRESIDENT Nixon's public abandonment of the policies of Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson, which were also President Eisenhower's policies, just about completes a job that had to be done.



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The Vice President has thought that Benson ought to be junked since 1956. After the disastrous 1958 congressional election, he made an active effort to junk him. The former Chairman of the Republican National Committee, Meade Alcorn of Connecticut, was the man chosen for the job.

Since it was clear that the President would not listen to the straight policy arguments against Benson, Alcorn, on Nixon's advice, made the political arguments. These had been only too amply underlined by the election returns. Yet the President's angry answering blast all but blew Alcorn through the door, into the next room; and after that, the subject of Benson was not raised again.

It is a proof of the Byzantinism of the Eisenhower White House that the subject was never again raised. The hapless Benson has managed to combine a more than fourfold increase of the huge Agriculture Department appropriations with an actual decline of farm income. This year, the \$6 billion-odd that will be spent through Benson amounts to something like half of the reduced revenues of the American farm community.

This incredible record is defended by Benson on the ground that Congress would never enact "the Benson pro-

gram." But in fact neither Benson himself, nor his chief, the President, has ever, at any time, launched an all-out, knock-down, drag-out fight for decisive legislative changes in the farm program.

Prayer has been the Benson specialty, and latterly he has become a sort of ancient mariner of Washington, almost literally "stopping one in ten" to assure these reluctant listeners that his farm policy was working better and better. Once he even cornered Sen. John F. Kennedy's personal chief of staff, Theodore Sorenson, in the Senate cafeteria.

SINCE sentimentality has no place in Government, the fact that his failures have made the Secretary of Agriculture a somewhat pathetic figure has no bearing on the case. There was a touch of ruthlessness in the way the Vice President, free to junk Benson at last, duly and publicly did what he had wanted to do for so long. But in the circumstances, ruthlessness was justified and even called for.

As already noted, moreover, this junking of Benson was not an isolated episode. It was, instead, the culminating episode in an important process. Since Friday, July 22, the Vice President has been briskly disentangling himself from the President.

The pace of this process was forced, and it was therefore given an undesired dramatic character, by Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller's threat to make a floor fight about the platform at the Republican Convention. Civil rights and defense, the two main issues on which Rockefeller and Nixon thereupon reached agreement on July 22, were again issues on which the Vice President has never agreed with the President.

Rockefeller did not have the votes to make a respect-

able showing in a floor fight. The Vice President would have much preferred the less drastic method of distinguishing his own positions from the President's positions after the Convention was out of the way. But Rockefeller, by threatening a floor fight, forced Nixon to say what he had always meant to say rather earlier than he had meant to say it.

THE DEMOCRATS will of course cry out that this is "repudiation" of Mr. Eisenhower, and in a sense they will be right. Because of the constitutional changes already examined in this space, a modern Vice President cannot imitate Vice President John N. Garner, for instance, who took rather well-marked independent positions while maintaining friendly working relations with President Roosevelt. A modern Vice President is like a cabinet officer, who must either go along or get out—the thing to be got out of, in the Vice President's case, being the National Security Council.

Accordingly, Nixon has swallowed his objections and gone along. But objections there have been. He has always believed in a stronger defense program, more forceful civil rights program, a changed farm program, a somewhat less conservative domestic economic policy. About Mr. Eisenhower, he was once heard to remark wonderingly:

"In domestic matters, you know, he's really more conservative than Bob Taft."

If the Vice President's own views now emerge, and the opposition cries "repudiation," it does not matter very much. As his party's nominee, Nixon not only has the right to speak his own mind, as Mr. Eisenhower recognized in his telegram of congratulation at Chicago, he also has the duty to do so.

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